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REPORTED SMUGGLING OF RUBBER, PETROLEUM, COPRA, TOBACCO,
AND WEAPONS ON MAJOR SEA ROUTES

Waldo De Mier

[Comment and summary: The following is a summary of a series
of articles by Waldo de Mier which appeared in Hierro, Bilbao
daily newspaper, 11 - 17 February 1953. Topics discussed in the
articles are smuggling, piracy, hijacking, and illegal transport
of rubber, petroleum, copra, tobacco, and arms.

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I. SMUGGLING AND PIRACY

Smuggling and piracy are busy trades on all oceans of the globe, from the Yellow Sea to the North Sea and the Mediterranean. (1, 2) A few years ago, Augusto Assia, on a visit to the United Press offices in Hong Kong, was amazed to learn that the story of an attack on a small ship off the Formosa coast by Chinese pirate junks was rejected by the press-agency director. It was not considered news.

During World War II, the restless mariners of Bias Bay, the favored haunt of Chinese smugglers, spent idle years under the shadow of US, French, and British men-of-war, but when the Nationalists and the Mao Reds split Chinese power, the area off the coast again became dangerous waters of piracy, even for ocean liners.

After the war, the British Squadron and US fighter and bomber aircraft based in this area conducted Operation Wallop against the bootleggers for several weeks, combing the coves of the broken coast line between Shanghai and Singapore. Weapons were found aboard some of the junks, but not a word of

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information was extracted from the crews. For a few months all was quiet on the China seas. The mopping-up operation had cost 300,000 pounds sterling, more than the pirates could have stolen over a period of some years.

The Chinese Civil War favored the pirates. The British frigate Amethyst was attacked by Chinese marauders flying the flag of Mao Tse-tung. Sailing and steaming among the isles off the China coast, the pirates man every kind of vessel from small junks to 2,000-ton ships. Sometimes they fly the flag of Nationalist China, and sometimes the Chinese Communist flag, knowing in either case that British naval ships hesitate to act for fear of starting a war.

During 1952, more than 50 Japanese fishing boats were captured and only 50 percent of the crews were repatriated after the ransom was paid.

British Vice-Admiral Guy Russel has orders to maintain constant patrols on the China coast, but commanders of ships and aircraft do not risk involvement with Chinese Communist forces. Capt Allison Peters of the Brisbane, registered in Tainan, told the Daily Herald of San Francisco he would never again take his ship to China because he has been stopped three times by pirates who collected ransoms from him and his passengers.(1)

The United Press in Hong Kong reported the story of the 3559-ton Windsong. This ship left Keelung, Formosa, on a winter night in 1952 with 78 passengers, almost all US citizens, and 120 crew members. Henry Stanton, her master, carried a pistol, the only weapon aboard. A fast torpedo boat stopped the Windsong by raking her bridge with machine-gun fire. Pirates disguised as Chinese Nationalist naval officers boarded the Windsong, examined her documents, and inspected her passengers' passports with the hope of finding notables aboard. They asked for gold and, on being told that there was none aboard, demanded 4,000 US dollars from Captain Stanton, which sum his passengers handed over. The pirate commander threatened to increase the amount of the ransom if he should meet his victims again. On arriving in Amoy, Stanton said that the approximately 70 men on the attacking ship were heavily armed. The Nationalists denied the presence of any such naval vessel in the area, and the British fleet never found the corsairs.

Rubber, Petroleum, and Copra Hijacked Afloat

Chinese piracy is passing to the stage wherein human ransom is secondary, and fighting between marine gangs is the most profitable venture. The corsairs of the present ply the waters of China and Malaya, stealing copra, petroleum, and rubber, along with gold watches, fountain pens, and jewelry.

The Strait of Malacca and the area lying between north British Borneo, the Philippine Islands, and Macassar Strait are the most infested waters. The high price of rubber has encouraged its illicit sale and, consequently, the intensity of hijacking at sea. In Malacca Strait, the runners are mostly Chinese with some Indonesians and Thais. Murder is decreasing as an adjunct to this type of seafaring. Kidnaping of crewmen is also on the decline.

British and US naval and air forces hold no terror for the Chinese and Malay pirates of today. The Chinese- and English-language press of Hong Kong frequently carry stories of piracy in local waters, especially between Hong Kong and Macao, but the British Navy and the naval police are rarely called upon to investigate. It is the Singapore stock market which determines the activity of the rubber and copra pirates. If quotations are high on the market, contraband is heavy.(2)

Modern Type of Pirate

The new type of pirate is interested only in stealing the contraband cargo of other smugglers. They range from the Mediterranean to the North Sea and from

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there to the Pacific Ocean. World rearmament has bred these new thieves who hijack each other's cargoes of rubber in the waters off Venezuela, Guatemala, and Mexican California.

Captain Wilwise, a Medal-of-Honor winner in World War II, was tricked by rubber pirates near Punta Arenas, Costa Rica, while bound for San Francisco from Maracaibo. A fast launch signaled SOS by blinker and Wilwise hove to. A party boarded the ship with an "injured" man, then suddenly assaulted the master of the Linda and threatened her radio operator with a gun. The pirates directed Wilwise to a Nicaraguan cove, where unloading of the rubber was begun. After a few hours, a rival pirate ship appeared and in turn took possession of the Linda, ordering her to another Nicaraguan cove for further unloading. Fortunately, a US man-of-war appeared and the hijackers left in haste.

As the price of rubber increased, the risk of transporting a cargo of this commodity increased. Other ships carrying rubber were stopped, and some thought was given to prohibiting the sale of surplus US naval speed craft. A US Senator asked an American naval force commander how the pirate activity could be lessened. The naval officer said, "Lower the price of rubber." The shipping companies trembled each time a ship loaded with rubber put to sea. The coast of Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil harbored rubber pirates who stalked every load of the strategic cargo.

Copra Replaces Rubber as Valuable Cargo

When it appeared that the theft of rubber on the seas was lessening, it was merely a shift to greed for copra.

The political upsets in Guatemala temporarily favored the rubber and copra pirates who stole contraband cargoes. Hoisting the Guatemalan flag confused the Cuban and Costa Rican marine police who patrolled outside their own territorial waters. All was confusion in those days when the "Caribbean Legion" was at odds with the police and the policy of the United States of Central America, and the gangs afloat took advantage of it.

Names of emigre Spanish Reds were among those arrested by the marine police of Guatemala, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Cuba. They were men ready for any adventure promising profit.

The stabilization of prices and of the political situation eliminated the wave of piracy which troubled the Caribbean and the Pacific coasts of Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Mexico. However, those corsairs may sail again if rubber and copra sell at premium prices.(3)

Tobacco Smuggling in the Mediterranean

Bright tobacco and weapons have turned the eyes of the pirates toward Western horizons. Weapons contrabanding is second in importance to tobacco smuggling.

The case of the Combinatis is well remembered. Her illicit cargo of bright tobacco was stolen by the masked crew of the Esme, off the Mediterranean coast of Spain in 1952. The Combinatis' forged papers declared that she carried cork and cotton, but they were shown to the Spanish police in Melilla in the hope that the Esme gang would be brought to justice.

The Danish fishing vessel Gess-B was seen in waters off Antibes, Nice, Corsica, Sicily, Spanish Morocco, Tangiers, Malaga, and elsewhere. The French authorities in Antibes became suspicious and arrested her master, Axel Thunberg, a Danish national. The Gess-B had done more than carry tobacco from Tangiers

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to La Garde. The mate, Per Linden, a Swede, and the second mate, Edgar Jacobson, a Latvian, accused Thunberg of piracy. The police suggested that they had participated in the Esme hijacking at sea. They denied it, but Sidney H. Paley, a US citizen residing in Tangiers, confessed almost the entire story of the Combinatis. Paley was known in Tangiers for intense business activity in unknown ventures. Paley and another American named Forrest, his right-hand man, were chiefs of the Esme ring which sacked the Combinatis. These two masterminds were sentenced to 3 years in a US prison; Forrest was sentenced in absentia. The only two protests against the conviction came from a Mr Grenish and a banker named Lichtensteiger. The Spanish and French press reported the Combinatis incident and subsequent trials.

Many former rumrunners of Lake Michigan days are now busy with other contraband. The wreck of an Italian fishing smack was found floating near Antibes, and it was later learned that a rival boat had assaulted the "fishing vessel." The French police identified a body as Percy Brisson, a trafficker in drugs and tobacco.

II. EMPERORS OF CLANDESTINE TRADE

Henry Hell lives a respected life on the Cote d'Azur. He distributes calling cards printed "High Seas Exporter-Importer." His company transports legal cargoes of cigarettes as far as territorial waters and never worries about the destination of the goods acquired on the high seas. His power is secretly feared, for he directs a world-wide ring with bases in Tangiers, Nice, Cannes, Genoa, Naples, and Barcelona, and there is no proof of his activity.(4)

However, even Hell has his troubles now that rival gangs have begun to dispute his "territory." Former rumrunners who were deported from the US in 1949 and 1950 now hijack at sea. This rivalry is gradually decimating the pirates in the Mediterranean.

In Tangiers, the multimillionaire Ferrera hired Ginesta, a pirate, gave him an old sailing vessel equipped with an auxiliary engine, and told him to run a clandestine ferry service from Marseille to Morocco for wealthy passengers without French or Italian passports. Ginesta advertised in the newspapers that the Mediterranean Travel Bureau in the Old Harbor of Marseilles would take passengers to Tangiers or other points in French Morocco aboard the San Nicolas. The price of the passage was 100,000 French francs and one's life, because Ginesta, the ex-pirate, killed his human cargo for whatever valuables they took along on the trip. The murdering shipmaster was discovered when he talked in a drunken state. He accused the mysterious Ferrera.

Tangiers, Nice, and Naples are the bases of the pirate ships. The police state that one out of every ten minor vessels in these ports is a smuggler. It is difficult to trace them because damage to the sleek-looking vessels is repaired at sea. Once in a while, one of the corsairs fails to return from battle with another marauder of the Mediterranean.(5)

III. TRAFFIC IN WEAPONS

Clandestine traffic in weapons completes the picture of smuggling in recent years. Arms for the Jews and the Arabs in the Palestine conflict, for the Indonesians revolting from the Dutch, for the Sudanese, the Egyptians, and the Tunisians, for the Chinese Reds, and for the Vietnamese are some of the trade.

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A heated debate occurred in the Philippine Congress during the winter of 1952 over the heavy traffic in weapons being shipped from the Islands to Communist China. It was learned that a syndicate financed the extensive network of contraband arms for China. The National Bureau of Investigation discovered that the embargo on shipment of strategic materiel was being violated as follows:

1. Sale of Filipino merchant vessels to Hong Kong firms. These vessels departed from the Philippines with a full load of fuel. They were later unloaded and the ships went over to the Chinese Communists.
2. Duly registered Filipino vessels, but without legal documents, made repeated voyages with cargoes of war materiel for Chinese Communist ports.
3. Foreign (non-Filipino) vessels loaded their gasoline tanks to capacity in the Philippines and then sold it in Communist Chinese ports.
4. Several cargoes of special steel for weapons had been shipped to Communist China through Hong Kong firms.
5. Numerous vessels of foreign registry, some identified as working for Chinese Communists, had obtained clearance for European ports but were unloading their cargoes in Chinese Communist ports or transshipping them through Hong Kong firms.

Ernst Friedrich Wollweber

A Chinese Nationalist gunboat stopped a freighter of unidentified flag, outbound from Hamburg. It developed that the vessel was the Mai Rickmera, that her cargo was weapons and ammunition destined for Mao's troops, and that her crew was Communist. Her flag was West German. An investigation revealed that the contraband belonged to Wollweber, the State Secretary of the Ministry of Transportation in the German Democratic Republic, who is an experienced naval officer with a record of mutiny in the Kaiser's Navy. The USSR entrusted him with transporting contraband arms to China, Yugoslavia (before Tito's break), and Greece.

Adventurous Seamen Work for Gangs

A few days before the outbreak of the Tunisian revolt, the Casablanca and Suez newspapers carried advertisements such as this: "Trained navigators wanted. Experience in war waters preferred. High pay." Two or three of the applicants were chosen, and coincidentally they had been agents of the British or German intelligence service in World War II. These mariners were wanted to traffic in arms from Yugoslavia or the ports of East Germany to the Tunisian coast. Some were caught by the police but others are still running weapons across to northern Africa.

These gun runners are chartered by men who invest large sums in the purchase of weapons, usually bought in West Germany or in the Black Sea ports of Sulina or Varna. Agents of these greedy businessmen make contact with the rebel leaders and offer the goods at fantastic prices in pounds sterling or US dollars.

The Greek islands are a refuge for the contraband fleet which must hide from the fighting ships of the Western nations.

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A vessel in collusion with Tunisian rebels was recently stopped off Sfax. A Spanish smack from Almeria discovered the alliance between the gangs and a lighthouse which was flashing signals to the runners. The Tunisian district command of the French Navy was advised.

The sea lanes of the world are traversed by illegal cargoes which all the combined navies cannot completely confiscate.(6)

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1. Bilbao, Hierro, 11 Feb 53
2. Ibid., 12 Feb 53
3. Ibid., 13 Feb 53
4. Ibid., 14 Feb 53
5. Ibid., 16 Feb 53
6. Ibid., 17 Feb 53

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